Early Navigation on the Saskatchewan

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The Saskatchewan River is one of Canada's greatest waterways. Its two branches, draining the prairie country between Lake Winnipeg and the Rocky Mountains, are twin sisters of the Missouri and Mississippi. The north branch rises in the mountainous region of Western Alberta, flows north-east past Edmonton, and then turns south-east. At Battleford it receives the waters of the Battle River, and after passing Prince Albert it is joined by the south branch, the combined streams pouring their waters into the northern end of Lake Winnipeg at Grand Rapids. The South Saskatchewan some eight hundred miles in length, is formed by the union of two Rocky Mountain streams, the Bow and Belly Rivers, and after skirting Medicine Hat and Saskatoon, pours its swirling waters into the north branch, which, at this point is six hundred yards wide.

The history of navigation on the Saskatchewan dates from the old fur-trading days, when the northern wilderness first echoed to the stirring strains of the Highlander's bagpipes, and the chansons of red-sashed voyageurs and hardy coureurs du bois.

The name Saskatchewan means "swift current," and any one who has battled with its seething waters will admit that the stream does not belie its name. Rapids, shoals, and sand bars are characteristic of both branches of the river from the foot-hills to the forks, a little more than a hundred miles above Cumberland House. A short voyage

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down stream brings one to the Pas, which marks the extreme northern point that connect railway steel has yet reached on this continent. A train could be made up at the Pas, and in a week's time its passengers could step out on the platform in New York, San Francisco, or New Orleans.

The Pas is one of Canada's future cities, for a new line of glistening steel connects this point with Hudson's Bay. Eastward from the Pas, the river runs through a flat, marshy country, with shallow lakes on either hand. After passing through Cedar Lake--a beautiful sheet of water--it forms a huge angle and then makes a final plunge into Lake Winnipeg over the seven miles of Grand Rapids.

In the early 'eighties, the North-west Navigation Company placed a fleet of steamboats on the Saskatchewan, and from 1880 to 1885 the river was navigated each summer from Edmonton to Grand Rapids. The company had twelve miles of roadway built round the rapids, and freight was transferred by means of teams from the lake to the river boats and vice versa. The boats, which were drawn up on the bank during winter, were launched just as soon as the ice went out, and made the first trip with the high water.

These boats were run for the benefit of the great northern trade, and delivered most of the freight billed for Cumberland, the Pas, Prince Albert, Carleton, Battleford, Fort Pitt, and Edmonton. The first trip of the season was the most profitable and used to net the company something like $125,000, most of the freight going to the

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Hudson's Bay posts in the Far North. In 1882 the company's fleet consisted of the Manitoba, the Northcote, the Northwest, and the Marquis. The first two generally did the trip from Prince Albert to Edmonton, and the latter pair ran between Prince Albert and Grand Rapids.

The history of these early river boats is interesting. The Marquis was one of the old Red River steamers owned by a navigation company, of which, for a time, J. J. Hill was active warehouseman. When the railway advanced toward Winnipeg River, navigation was abandoned, and the Marquis was bought by the Northwest Navigation Company, run down the lake to Grand Rapids, taken to pieces, hauled across in sections, and rebuilt above the rapids. After an honorable career, her old hulk lay rotting on the river bank at Prince Albert, until it accidentally caught fire and was burned to ashes. The Manitoba, which went to pieces in the Shell River, formerly ran up the Assiniboine to Fort Ellis, but was transferred to the Saskatchewan in the summer of '82.

The oldest steamboats on the river were the Lily and the Northcote. The first drew too much water and was wrecked on a survey expedition up the south branch, above Saskatoon. It was the Lily which met the Marquis of Lorne at Carleton in 1881 and took him first to Prince Albert and then to Battleford, from which place he crossed overland to Calgary.

The Northcote distinguished herself during the Rebellion of '85 by serving as a military transport and

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gun-boat. When it was determined to send supplies to the scene of hostilities by the river, the Northcote, then at Medicine Hat, was taken to Saskatchewan Landing, where provisions and troops were taken on board. Captain "Gat" Howard, with a Gatling gun battery, almost monopolized the fore part of the upper deck, and the four companies of soldiers occupied the remainder. Two barges filled with supplies were lashed one on each side of the steamer, and the old stern-wheeler left on April 22nd for Clark's Crossing, where General Middleton anxiously awaited the expected stores.

But the Northcote's progress was slow. Owing to the turbulent nature of the South Saskatchewan, new channels are continually being cut, and the water is colored a deep yellow by the moving sand. The improvised gun-boat therefore had her share of troubles. She ran on the rocks once, ran ashore twice, and went aground on sand bars no less than eleven times in a single day. Clark's Crossing was reached on May 5th, and two of the companies were left there, with a considerable part of the stores. It was found that General Middleton had advanced to Fish Creek, and the boat arrived at that point, with the two remaining companies, on the following morning.

The General decided to send the Northcote down the river to fire upon the rebel stronghold at Batoche, while his main body of troops attacked it from the land. Unfortunately the steamer dropped down the stream too quickly, and, as she swung round the big bend above the town, she was swept by a leaden hail-storm from both sides of

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the river. At the same time, the rebels began to lower the heavy ferry cable to block her further progress. The pilot, seeing that his only chance of escape was to break the cable, ordered "full steam ahead." The next moment the Northcote struck the powerful steel hawser in the centre, and it bounded fully twenty feet into the air. The momentum acquired by the steamer caused her to pass partly under the wire before it fell on the hurricane deck, tearing off the top of the wheel house and sending the smoke stacks down with a crash. Although partially disabled, the old boat "was still in the ring," Amid a howl of rage she swung round in the current and drifted down stream, firing a broadside as she went. After maintaining a running fight for three days with the rebels along the shore, the staunch old boat reached Hudson's Bay Ferry, twenty-two miles down stream, and was met there by the Marquis. The two boats proceeded up stream to Batoche only to find that the town had already been taken.

Some twenty years later, a more disastrous fate overtook Captain Ross's boat, the City of Medicine Hat, in the crooked currents of the South Saskatchewan. While making a pleasure trip down stream from her namesake city, she was wrecked at Saskatoon in 1907. The cause of the wreck proved to be the submerged electric light and telegraph wires which crossed the river at this point.

One of the most interesting trips in recent years was that of the Alberta, of Prince Albert, through the dreaded Grand Rapids. It was a risky experiment, but fortune favored the adventurous crew; and though the boat sank immediately after reaching shore in the still water below, she was afloat again in less than a week. ~~At present she is doing duty~~ Later, she served as an excursion boat on the Red, and the Saskatchewan ~~knows~~ knew her no more.

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Navigation on the Saskatchewan was no easy task, even in its palmiest days. The channels were constantly changing, and it took a pilot with a practised eye to detect a shoal where, probably on the previous trip, a deep channel had existed. The larger boats had long spars attached to the bow, and these were operated by means of a donkey-engine. When the craft struck a sand-bar, these spars were set at an angle, and the donkey-engine proceeded to manipulate them in the same way that a man does a pole in punting a scow. As a rule the boats were of a very light draft, three feet being the maximum when fully loaded.

Until one became accustomed to life on the boat, sleep was out of the question; "sounding for the channel" was too important an item to be dispensed with, even under the most favorable circumstances. One man was stationed at the bow, with a long, thin pole, marked in feet, while another stood just outside the pilot-house. The first man would sound and call out in a monotonous voice the various depths—"two feet slack—three feet slacking—no bottom," or "three feet—two feet scant," as the case might be, and the call would be repeated by the man near the pilot-house.

The company used to engage Indians to cut wood during the winter at many points along the river, so that fuel could be easily obtained. Failing to reach one of these points the crew tied up the boat, and turned out to cut enough wood to last until the next wood-yard was reached. The transferring of freight from one boat to another, and to the various depots, was performed by Indians—the roustabouts—and it was truly marvellous to see what one of these men could carry.

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The usefulness of the old river boats was taken away, however, when the railways began to stretch out their tendons into the north. The Calgary and Edmonton line robbed the river of most of Edmonton's trade, and the Qu'Appelle, Long Lake and Saskatchewan Railway did the same for that of Prince Albert. At present there are no boats running on the south branch, and the once famous north branch fleet has given place to a few tug-boats and lumber-barges. "Sic transit gloria mundi."

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For Insr. Card